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Coaching stances : changing practice through self-reflection

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Literacy coaches must understand the sometimes subtle nuances in the language used to guide teachers in order to build their instructional capacity and ultimately increase student achievement. This article examines the coaching stances of "coaching, teaching and telling" that move along a continuum of support provided through a coaching framework for a literacy coach and her elementary teachers. Analysis of coaching practice was accomplished through a process of self-study and reflection that examined language over a three month period of coaching cycles. Rodgers and Rodgers outline three characteristics of effective coaching conversations that provide the catalyst of action to move the coaching practice forward and engage teachers in their own inquiry.

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Abstract

Instructional coaching is becoming the norm rather than the exception in many school districts across the country. With this exciting and challenging role comes the complexities of working with educators from many backgrounds, educational philosophies, and experiences. Among the many different structures of coaching is the literacy coach. This content specialized coach must juggle many roles including, reading expert, interventionist, researcher, literacy curriculum designer, professional development planner and liaison between district and building and often times between building administration and teachers. They are data analysts at the student, classroom and building levels and are observers of teachers' literacy instruction and kid watchers to see its impact. It is important for the literacy coach to build supportive relationships with teachers while providing the necessary questions and prompts to move their practice forward. Literacy coaches must understand the sometimes subtle nuances in the language used to guide teachers in order to build their instructional capacity and ultimately increase student achievement. This article examines the coaching stances of "coaching, teaching and telling" that move along a continuum of support provided through a coaching framework for a literacy coach and her elementary teachers. Analysis of coaching practice was accomplished through a process of self-study and reflection that examined language over a three month period of coaching cycles. Rodgers and Rodgers outline three characteristics of effective coaching conversations that provide the catalyst of action to move the coaching practice forward and engage teachers in their own inquiry.

It seems that over the last few years, the term "coaching" is being used more and more and in contexts that go beyond the playing field. In a profession filled with buzz words, "coaching" has become education's latest and (in my opinion) greatest catch phrase. There are instructional coaches, literacy coaches, math coaches, mentor coaches, model coaches, cognitive coaches, collegial coaches, Renewal Coaches (Reeves & Allison, 2009), partnership coaches; the list could go on and on. No matter the title or the structural format of the coaching framework, it appears that instructional coaching is here to stay.

This is good news for me. I'm a literacy coach! For the past five years, I have had the pleasure and challenge of working with teachers to build their instructional capacity and ultimately increase their students' literacy achievement. Sounds simple, but it is the most complex endeavor that I have ever undertaken.

Caps For Sale!- The Many Roles of a Literacy Coach

There is no denying that a literacy coach has to wear many hats and often times, the hats come in different styles depending on the school system. According to Walpole and Blamey (2008), the literacy coach must have the characteristics of an excellent classroom reading teacher and the focused skills of a reading specialist. The literacy coach works to increase teachers' ability to help struggling readers as well as improve their classroom instruction for all students. They are data analysts at the student, classroom and building levels. They are observers of teachers' instruction and kid watchers to see its impact. Literacy coaches are researchers and curriculum experts, professional development planners and liaisons between district and building and often

times between building administration and teachers. This is indeed a tall order to fill and one with which I have first-hand experience. However, with all its diversity in job descriptors, the one that I have found the most challenging (and the most important) are the subtle nuances required to move along the continuum of support for teachers within coaching conversations.

In Systems for Change In Literacy Education: A Guide to Professional Development (2001), Lyons and Pinnell describe this continuum as shifting stances between coaching, teaching and telling. Rodgers and Rodgers (2007) describe this continuum as decision making with one end as direct application or providing specific, direct information and the other end as open application where the coach provides a "forum for examining principles of instruction" (p. 15). My question became, "Where do I most often fall on the continuum in my coaching conversations and am I truly moving along the continuum as Rodgers and Rodgers suggest, within each coaching session?" The complexity for me revolves around knowing when to adopt each of these stances and when a shift along the continuum is needed. It became apparent that a little self-reflection and study of my coaching practice was in order.

Mirror, Mirror On The Wall – A Hard Look Through Self-Reflection

As a literacy coach, I encourage self-reflection for the teachers I work with. I provide a variety of reflective questions with feedback from each observation and often these questions guide the coaching cycles (pre-observation discussion, observation, post-observation discussion) that we walk through together. Sadly though, I didn't often practice what I preached. How could I? Wearing all those hats kept me extremely busy!

In planning for my own reflection and self-study I looked to *Reflective Practice to Improve Schools: An Action Guide for Educators* (York-Barr, Sommers, Ghere, & Montie, 2006) for a framework of reflection. The authors suggest a four step process including asking, "What happened? (Description), Why? (Analysis, interpretation), So What? (Overall meaning and application), and Now What? (Implications for action)" (p. 84). I felt the best way for me to truly know what was said in my coaching conversations, I needed to digitally record pre-observation and post-observation conversations. I chose two teachers, one first-grade and one second-grade, who were both engaged in learning a new instructional framework (Workshop Model). Both teachers agreed to be involved in monthly professional learning and coaching cycles around implementation of the workshop framework and are part of a cohort of teachers from across the state that are engaged in this exciting work.

Additionally, I defined the three stances (coaching, teaching, and telling) that Lyons and Pinnell (2001) outlined so that I had a working understanding to label and reflect on my language. For my purposes, I defined "coaching" as prompting language used to support information that I perceived was already known by the teacher, but needed support or flexibility in using; "teaching" as language used to give new information to teachers by explicit instruction, modeling or demonstration either through professional learning or in "right now" learning situations in the classroom; and finally "telling" as language used to give direct information that is perceived to be already known by the teacher, without prompting or questioning – more of a "do this" or "don't do that" structure. My objective was to record my coaching conversations and analyze my language through the lens of coaching, teaching and telling and using the four step

process for self-reflection referenced earlier (York-Barr et al., 2006) to determine the steps needed to move my coaching practice forward. I gathered recordings and reflections over a three-month period.

Burden of Proof – The Journey of Discovery

Full disclosure—listening to myself was incredibly difficult! Over the three-month period, I recorded several hours of pre and post observation conversations. I also recorded my reflections of each coaching visit in an audio diary format using the York-Barr et al. (2006) four-step self-reflection framework. Prior to a coaching visit, I listened to the previous pre and post observation discussions and my audio reflection diary to prepare for the visit. While I was collecting these audio recordings, I did not analyze my language; I simply collected the data for later analysis.

As the time for data collection came to an end and the analysis began, I made a prediction of where I thought I would fall most often on the continuum of coaching stances. I have long worried that I tend to rest in the "telling" stance with the implied justification that often teachers want direct answers to their questions, especially when they are implementing something new. With this in mind I listened to each pre and post observation recording and analyzed the language that I used through the filter of the coaching, teaching, and telling definitions I outlined earlier. I charted my verbal responses on a table to initially see how many of each were represented and then, to further my analysis, I looked at the qualitative essence of each exchange. I was surprised to find that the majority of my language with both teachers fell into the coaching and teaching categories with very little telling. Qualitative analysis revealed that my language

tended to be supportive, which at the surface level seems positive, but in hindsight, did not provide the "push" that was needed to challenge the teachers with their thinking and practice. This was not surprising to me. I know that I am more comfortable reinforcing positive behavior and that "nudging" conversations are not comfortable for me.

I also noticed that my language changed depending on the teacher. Both teachers have been teaching for more than 10 years, but the second-grade teacher (I'll call her Kara) is much more tentative about her abilities to implement the workshop framework. With her, I noticed that my language was supportive, reinforcing the positive things I saw, yet more direct in what to do next. For instance, during a pre-observation discussion Kara indicated that she was feeling overwhelmed with all of the components of the workshop framework especially managing her guided reading groups. My response to her was, "I think that you are working hard to fit everything into your reading workshop, but I can see that you are feeling overwhelmed with all of the elements. How would you feel about taking something off your plate? Why don't you stop conferring right now? Meet with your small groups so you have a collective idea of reading behavior to determine your focus for instruction and add conferring back in when you feel like you have small groups under control. Would you feel comfortable with that?" This exchange reinforced Kara's feelings and provided a direct solution to the issue. As time went on, Kara did add conferring back into the reading workshop, and is better able to manage conferences along with guided reading groups.

In contrast, the first-grade teacher (I'll call her Michelle) has embraced workshop and is excited to discuss it with whomever will engage in the conversation. My language

tended to reside within a collaborative framework with her. For example, during a coaching visit this winter, Michelle was questioning how she could incorporate an objective that her "non-workshop" teammates were implementing. We had discussion around what was done in the past and how it might look different in a workshop classroom. It only took a few minutes for Michelle to make the connections and to start brainstorming ways to address the objectives. My only coaching question was, "How do you see what you are going to do with informational writing fitting into your reading workshop?" This helped to facilitate her thinking as she processed different ways to expand the unit into cross-curricular connections. It was clear that my role in this exchange was as collaborator in the curriculum planning for the unit.

Oh, The Place You Will Go! – Learning Through Self-Reflection

While the journey of self-reflection was at times difficult – I learned that I tend to stammer and use far more words than I really need to make a point – it was enlightening. Ultimately, the goal of this experience is to build my capacity as a literacy coach and find ways to positively change my practice. There are many challenges of facilitating effective coaching conversations and I have discovered over the years that there is an "art" to the fluid movement along the continuum. Rodgers and Rodgers (2007) have outlined three principals of effective coaching conversations that will guide my work and help me answer the Now What? of the reflection framework. The first is to "adopt a co-learner stance" (p. 29). Their suggestion is to develop a position of wonder or investigation as coaches facilitate conversations around teachers' practice. According to the authors,

> This wondering aloud provides a model for the teacher to adopt a similar tentative, investigative stand; send the message that the coach really is a co-learner; clearly reveals the complexity of the work; and shows clearly that the coach is not the sole authority when it comes to skillful teaching and decision making (p. 29).

I found that many times over the three-month period, when I started conversations with "I wonder" the conversation that followed was often meaningful and teacher directed. This language suggests a fourth element on the coaching continuum – learning.

The second principal addressed by Rodgers and Rodgers (2007) is to "provide a forum for inquiry whereby teachers can examine principles of instruction and suggest alternative teaching moves" (p. 29). This component suggests the importance of creating an atmosphere of respect where teachers' opinions, questions, and knowledge are valued and taking risks is encouraged. In looking at my practice, I believe that this is accomplished in the professional learning that I provide for the cohort of teachers engaged in learning and implementing workshop. But, I need to find the time and space to delve into this principle within the confines of a coaching conversation.

Finally, Rodgers and Rodgers (2007) suggest using "collaborative inquiry as the mechanism to provide feedback, facilitate reflection, and foster change" (p. 29). Our goal as coaches can be summed up in two words—facilitate change. It sounds easy, but change within ourselves is hard. Add the layer of facilitating change in others and we have reached a complexity that can be overwhelming at times, but empowering when achieved. In looking at my coaching practice over the years and through a magnifying

glass over the last three months, I question how often I actively engage in collaborative inquiry with the teachers I coach. Of course I collaborate with them; we plan instruction together, look at student data together, chart a course for response together. But how often do I learn alongside them? Lindfors defines inquiry as "a language act in which one attempts to elicit another's help in going beyond his or her present understanding" (as cited in Rodgers & Rodgers, 2007, p. 20). Perhaps the change that I need to facilitate to move my practice forward is to add the newly defined fourth stance on the coaching continuum, that of a collaborative learner.

Curtain Call – Final Thoughts

The process of self-reflection and the commitment to improving practice can be an arduous task; however it is necessary to fully understand the complexities of what drives us as professionals. At the onset of this journey, I labeled myself as a literacy coach, but now I see that my role is so much more. I am a partner, collaborator, facilitator, teacher, learner, supporter, encourager, and yes, sometimes a teller. These are the many stances that characterize me as I don the different hats of my role as a literacy coach. While our days are more often than not, filled to the brim with meeting the needs of our teachers, administrators, and most importantly, our students; we must make room to add one more hat – that of a self-reflection.

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Appendix

Educational Leadership Guidelines for Writers

Educational Leadership, ASCD's flagship journal, is intended for everyone interested in preK-12 education issues, including curriculum, instruction, supervision, and leadership. Each issue contains articles written by educators for educators. We particularly look for articles that inspire improved teaching and learning.

Educational Leadership is known for its theme issues. The more appropriate an article an article is for a theme issue, the more likely it is we will be able to publish it. We also accept articles on non-theme-related topics if the subject is compelling and timely

What We Look For

The best way to determine what kids of articles we publish is to read the magazine.

Most published articles are between 1,500 and 2,.500 words, are written in conversational style, and cover topics that are useful for preK-12 educators. These are some of the qualities we look for:

Articles describing research-based solutions to current problems in education.

Reasoned debate on controversial subjects.

Opinion pieces that interweave experiences and ideas.

Program descriptions (school, district, or state).

Practical examples that illustrate key points.

An emphasis on explaining and interpreting research results rather than on methodology.

International contribution.

*We are not looking for term papers or reviews of literature, and we rarely publish conventional research reports. We do not publish articles that have been previously published, in print or electronic form. We cannot review drafts and usually do not find query letters helpful; we prefer to read the manuscript. While your article is under review with us, we ask that you not submit it to another publication or post it on a website or blog – not even your own.

How to Prepare Your Manuscript

Double-space all copy and leave generous margins.

Number all pages.

Indicate the number of words in the manuscript, including references and figures.

Include your name, address, phone number, fax number, and e-mail address on the cover sheet.

We use the reference style outlined by the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*. Cite references in the text like this (Jones, 2000) and list them in the bibliography at the end of the article. Please do not use footnotes or endnotes for

the references. For other matters of style, refer to *The Chicago Manual of Style* and *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (11th ed.).

Authors bear full responsibility for the accuracy of citations, quotations, figures and facts.